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Scholarships for special needs children gets positive response in Senate, heads for House vote



ATLANTA – Senate Bill 10, legislation that will allow the parents of special needs children to use scholarships to educate their children either in a public or private school passed the Senate today by a vote of 31 to 23. The bill, sponsored by Senate President Pro Tempore Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) is modeled after Florida's successful *McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities*.

“This is not a new proposal,” Sen. Johnson said, surrounded by parents of special needs children who will benefit from the legislation if it passes the House and is signed into law by Gov. Perdue. “The *Georgia Special Needs Scholarships* will provide money for children with disabilities and will combine parent-directed choices with student-directed funding.

“At the heart of this issue is who should decide what is in the best interest of a child with disabilities – the parents or the government,” Sen. Johnson said on the floor of the Senate this morning.

Sen. Johnson explained to his colleagues in the Senate that if a school fails to meet the expectations of the parents of a special needs child, then the GSN Scholarship will allow them to use the state's share

of their child's funding as a scholarship to enroll their child in another school – either within the public school system or at a private school.

In just six years, Florida's McKay program has gone from funding less than 1,000 children in its first year to more than 17,000 students last year. According to the Manhattan Institute, 93 percent of the parents of children with disabilities have said they are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the new school compared with those who were satisfied (33 percent) with the public school where their child previously was enrolled. Class sizes are smaller, behavior problems have decreased and the children were far less victimized by other students who ridiculed them and their disabilities.

The scholarships will be based on the cost of delivering the same services of the current public school. Georgia officials anticipate that more than 4,000 students will take advantage of the scholarships next year, and that the average scholarship will be about \$9,000 per year.

"Public schools do a tremendous job meeting the needs of most special needs students," Sen. Johnson said today, "and they are to be commended for that. However, all children are different and this bill is designed to give parents more options in choosing the best educational program for their child. We recognize that all children are individuals and a different school might more closely meet the needs of the student and parents.

"I fundamentally believe that parents are in the best position to know their children and their unique needs. They deserve the right to make the most appropriate decisions for their own children. This is especially true for parents of children with special needs," Sen. Johnson added. "These families have so many hurdles and the ability to choose the most appropriate education for their children should not be one of them."

Sen. Johnson said this proposal will not reduce the amount of funds available to public schools. In fact, he says, this legislation should leave school systems with more money because they are educating and transporting fewer students. Only the state's portion of the funds will follow the child to the selected public or private school as a scholarship.

"At its basic level, SB 10 simply provides an option for the parent of a child with special needs when they believe the local public school is not helping their child. Most parents – upward of 95 percent – will still decide that their neighborhood public school is the best educational system for their child. But as for the other five percent, they should not be blocked from making those educational choices that will allow their special education children to be all that they can be."

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To listen to **Senate Bill 10** floor debate on the Senate Web site [click here](#).

Sen. Eric Johnson is the President Pro Tempore of the State Senate. He represents Senate District One, which includes Bryan County and portions of Chatham and Liberty counties. He may be reached by e-mail at eric.johnson@senate.ga.gov or at 404.656.5109.